Hero and Theme in the *Aeneid*

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No literary form, after Vergil got through with it, was ever the same again. We are well aware of this in the *Eclogues* and the *Georgics*, but we do not always bear it in mind when thinking of the *Aeneid*. It is, in a sense, impossible to judge the *Aeneid* in its proper context. It appears to be the sole surviving example of a kind of poem once apparently fairly numerous—the foundation-epic. As a consequence, we find ourselves judging it in the context of poems we know to be quite different in origin and technique, as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, or quite different in intent, as the *Argonautica* and the later Latin epics.

But in whatever context we set it, surely we are doing wrong to Vergil's intention and achievement if we read the *Aeneid* as a conventional epic, or as imperial propaganda in the disguise of conventional epic.[1] We have a fairly good idea what conventional epic meant in the Roman tradition at least; it meant a rhetorical handling of Roman history or of Greek legend. Vergil gives us poetic fiction, with only marginal reference to either Greek legend or Roman history. In the opening lines of the third *Georgic* he had scornfully rejected the conventional epic on Greek legendary themes; the conventional epic on Roman historical themes, we are told, he had considered and dismissed even earlier, not because he did not feel equal to it, but because the subject

[1] For the older orthodox tradition, the best sources are: W. Y. Sellar, *Roman Poets of the Augustan Age: Virgil* (Oxford 1897), especially chapters 2, 9–11; R. Heinze, *Virgils epische Technik*[3] (Leipzig 1928) (first edition 1903); A. Cartault *L'art de Virgile dans l'Eneide* (Paris 1926), a running commentary with a wholesome mixture of respect and irreverence. Newer approaches are offered by: V. Pöschl, *Die Dichtkunst Virgils* (Innsbruck 1950); English translation by G. Seligson, *The Art of Vergil; Image and Symbol in the Aeneid* (Ann Arbor 1962); J. Perret, *Virgile, l'homme et l'oeuvre* (Paris 1952); E. Paratore *Virgilio*[2] (Firenze 1954). The ghost of the old school walks again in R. Graves, *Oxford Addresses on Poetry* (London 1962) 29–53.

For recent work, see G. E. Duckworth, "Recent Work on Vergil (1940–1956)," *CW* 51 (1958) Nos. 4–8, especially pages 151–59, 185–91, and "Recent Work on Vergil (1957–1963)," *CW* 57 (1964) 193–228.

matter was repugnant.[2] Vergil's achievement is, and so far as we can tell, always was, unique in Roman literature, not only in excellence of execution, but in plan and purpose. After him, with men like Lucan and Silius on one side, Statius and Valerius Flaccus on the other, Roman epic returned to its familiar paths of Roman history and Greek legend.

Servius, in the introduction to his commentary, expresses the opinion that the aim of Vergil was to imitate Homer and praise Augustus *a parentibus* (a qualification sometimes overlooked). It was reserved for later scholars to see the poet as an employee in a versified advertising campaign for the new regime, and to identify Aeneas, at least partially, with Augustus. Neither conception has ever fitted itself very comfortably to the text of the poem, and much admirable ingenuity has been expended in the attempt to make them fit.

Aeneas has proved a baffling character, and well he may, for he is a curious compound of history, legend, and invention, a compound that Vergil had not time to blend completely. Some of the difficulties have been explained on the supposition that he represents or foreshadows Augustus; but this will not do. Even when we allow for the important fact that the Augustus we know is largely the product of more than thirty years after Vergil's death, Aeneas has very little in common with that witty, shrewd, self-confident cynic who pulled together a distracted civilization, and died saying, "Well, boys, I put on a good show, didn't I?"

The chosen patron of Augustus was Apollo. In the *Iliad*, Apollo is peculiarly solicitous for Aeneas' welfare, and three times personally intervenes on his behalf (5.344–448, 17.322–43, 20.79–340). In the *Aeneid*, though Apollo's name, if we include the name Phoebus, occurs more often than that of any deity except Jupiter,[3] he never moves to the help of Aeneas, even when Aeneas is wounded and under the ineffective care of one of Apollo's favorite disciples. In the action he appears only once (9.638–57), to withdraw Ascanius from combat.[4] That Apollo,

[2] *Offensus materia*, Vita Donati 19.

[3] Jupiter 86, Apollo 62 (Phoebus 32), Juno 56, Mars 43 (Mavors 7), Venus 40 (Cytherea 6).

[4] Ascanius, about to shoot his arrow, invoked not the archer Apollo, but Jupiter, who approved the prayer, though no god is said to guide the shaft. Apollo's action is limited to making Ascanius stop, not because Ascanius' life is in danger, but we must suppose, because Vergil wished to stress the remoteness of this god from all

whom Vergil holds so rigorously to a remote prophetic function, is named in the *Aeneid* half again as often as Venus, is a useful indication of the dangers that attend the use of raw statistics in literary criticism; but his complete inaction on Aeneas' behalf, in the face of these numerous mentions and the Homeric precedent, is very remarkable if Aeneas is meant to prefigure Augustus.

Whom does he in fact recall, this lonely, disillusioned warrior, at once magnanimous and ruthless, who enjoys the direct favor and protection of Venus, yet who, rather reluctantly, abandons a passionate and politically capable queen to continue the task of empire-building, who himself represents an old order destined to disappear, but is engaged in founding, by reluctant violence, a new order that he will not live to enjoy, a new order to be administered by his son under the direct patronage of Apollo, while the father himself is to be received among the gods? Surely this can be no other than the great Julius, altered and idealized to be sure, but unmistakable.

This identification establishes the relevance of the main theme of the action, almost impossible to do so long as Aeneas was confused with Augustus. The war which Vergil is at such pains to present as almost a civil war is the mythical counterpart of the civil war in which Caesar decided the fate of Rome. Lavinia is, in fact, simply *basileia*; Vergil's awareness of this explains why he, not incapable of depicting a feminine character, left her such a shadowy figure. Minute correspondence in detail is not to be looked for, though some minor points now fall readily into place: for example, the ambiguity of Aeneas' relations with Dido reflects the ambiguity of Caesar's relations with Cleopatra; again, it is a fair guess that the unexpected song of Iopas about natural philosophy (1.740–46) may go back to the same possibly veridical source as the discourse of Acoreus in Lucan's poem (10.193 ff.). In the main action, one might point out that Aeneas' support, like Caesar's, comes principally from the North, with particular mention, rather oddly in Aeneas' case, of what in Caesar's time

connection with warfare. Even the shield of Aeneas, which displays at Actium an embattled Neptune, Venus, Minerva, Mars, keeps Apollo remote from the fighting—*arcum intendebat desuper*. The language of the passage would even be consistent with the idea that Apollo does not discharge a shaft, but scatters the Egyptians, Indians, and Arabs with the mere terror of the bent bow.

was Cisalpine Gaul. Aeneas, like Caesar, is defending his *dignitas* and his legitimate claim, against a broken promise. But we can hardly equate Turnus with Pompey (or is Latinus Pompey, *magni nominis umbra*?) or Mezentius with Cato, or even, I suppose, Pallas with Curio. Vergil was writing myth, not allegory; fiction, not displaced history. It is the spiritual significance of the action that matters, not its material details. Aeneas' past is Troy, which, however imposing its achievements and renown, is to be completely superseded; Caesar's past was the old Roman aristocracy. Aeneas' task as shaper of the future is not to found, but to make possible the founding of, the Roman state; Caesar as shaper of the future is to make possible the founding of the Roman monarchy. Vergil's view of Caesar is much like that of Guglielmo Ferrero: that he was a great destroyer, whose necessary work of demolition cleared the ground for the subsequent building of Augustus. The ambiguity of his attitude towards Aeneas reflects the reservations implicit in his references to the historical Caesar.

Vergil was aware—how could he not be?—of the conflict between Oriental and Occidental ideas; and he did not indiscriminately reject either. He knew that for building power and maintaining order on an imperial scale, the East had experience and technique that the West could not match, and must learn to assimilate. But the Eastern influence must be absorbed; it must not be allowed to dominate. Vergil is giving us not a history of the action, nor an allegory of it, but a dramatization of the spiritual issues at stake in the revolution that culminated in the short-lived triumph of Caesar, and the enduring triumph of monarchic centralization against the traditional freedoms of the *Senatus Populusque Romanus*. It is worth notice that in the *Aeneid*, only on the defeated side is there discussion and opposition; on the victorious side there is only submission to a charismatic leader. That Vergil thought this an acceptable price to pay for peace and order, if it was a necessary price, I am willing to believe; the whole poem shows that he thought it a high price.

The *Aeneid* is not an imitation of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*; it is in a sense a serious parody of them, somewhat as the work of Joyce or Kazantzakis is a serious parody, or as Milton's *Paradise Lost* contains serious parody of earlier epic and romance.[5] Like

[5] Cf. Terence Spencer, "John Milton: The Great Rival," *Listener*, 70 (1963) 123 ff.

the *Eclogues* and the *Georgics*, the *Aeneid* exhibits a unique tension between emotional involvement and detached irony. Even there, Vergil never loses the distinctive touch of *molle atque facetum*. All scholars are always in danger of assuming that the mind of the poet they study is as conventional as their own, and in the same ways. We are the poorer for it if we cannot appreciate the impudent wit of borrowing the line *Invitus, regina*, etc. and making light verse serve the purpose of tragedy; or if we are not amused when Latinus, after the magnificent simile of the rock unshaken by storm, goes on to say, "Oh well, have it your own way; no one pays any attention to me anyway" (7.586–600); or when the character of Aeneas' chief champion at the Latin court is gratuitously developed as a sort of bourgeois Thersites.

The episode of Nisus and Euryalus is an excellent example of the inversion of epic convention, for here we have an obvious model. The night raid of Odysseus and Diomede is almost high-spirited; the action is competently handled by experienced fighters, and is successful. That of Nisus and Euryalus is an orgy of useless carnage not merely irrelevant to the purpose of the expedition but inimical to it; it is carried on by inexperienced youngsters, and is completely bungled. It is not an imitation, but a grim parody of the Homeric scene.

True epic battles, however terrible, however brutal, are and are meant to be exhilarating. Vergil's battles, however violently energetic, are and are meant to be depressing. The fighting is grim, bloody, and pitiless, like that in the Roman civil wars. Few ask quarter, and none are granted it. There are no chivalrous episodes like those of Diomede and Glaucus, or Hector and Ajax. It is surely not without significance that the most striking exhibition of great-souledness in the old heroic sense is the final combat and death of Mezentius, not otherwise presented as an admirable character, unless in his love for his son, and his horse. Vergil did not have to do this with Mezentius; other traditions reserved him for Iulus.[6] The old warlike virtues are being discredited by association. Vergil reserves his approbation for failure in battle and success in peace; and he reserves Iulus for the uses of peace. A proper epic hero enjoys fighting and is superbly confident; even if in the end he goes down to defeat he is a triumphant warrior.

[6] Cato, ut vid. apud Serv. ad *Aen.* 6.760.

Vergil designs a hero who detests fighting, and is never confident even in the face of continued good fortune.

The identification of the poem's central theme as a mythical counterpart of Caesar's civil war permits us to see more clearly the roles of Venus and Juno. To a superficial view, the poem represents the triumph of Venus over Juno. Yet it is Juno that opens the poem, and Juno that closes it—opens it as the patron of Carthage, and closes it as the patron of an Italy that will honor her more than any other nation does. It is Juno more than any other deity that instigates action, and the important thing in the end is the acquiescence of Saturnian Juno, that is to say, Italian Juno,[7] in the survival of the Trojans; but only on condition that the Oriental element be assimilated completely in the Occidental. In fact, Juno has won; for her quarrel was not with Aeneas personally, but with Troy. Jupiter recognizes her victory: *do quod vis et me victusque volensque remitto* (12.833).

The success of Imperial propaganda, designed presumably to appeal particularly to the increasing Oriental element at Rome, and in the important Eastern provinces, has concealed from us the fact that in early Roman tradition Venus is unimportant compared to Juno and Diana. Her cult was private, theirs public. She was not the ancestress of the Roman people. Those who according to tradition flocked to the *asylum* of Romulus were not his kinsmen, nor were the Sabine women. She was the ancestress or the protectress only of a few great families, and became of public concern only when one of these families swallowed up the state.

Venus does not in fact play a very constructive part in the action. She cheered Aeneas on the African coast, made him invisible on his way to the city, and substituted Cupid for Ascanius —quite unnecessarily, for Dido was already well disposed towards the Trojans. The implication that Aeneas was the sort of man that even his mother did not think likely to be a successful lover without the help of divine trickery would be monstrously unjust if Aeneas had been intended merely as a portrait of Julius Caesar, except in so far as divine intervention emphasizes results rather than causes. Venus also procured arms for Aeneas, and healed his wound. It took her a long time to get around to providing arms—though there was really no hurry; Aeneas had not lost the arms which had served him perfectly well up to that time. The

[7] *Greece and Rome* 3, n.s., (1956) 59–60.

matter of timeliness did not at all escape Vergil's notice, as Vulcan's answer to Venus shows (8.395 ff.). The main purpose of the provision of arms is undoubtedly to introduce the shield-pictures; but it also gives Vergil a chance to depict the gently scandalous scene, so warmly appreciated by Montaigne, of Venus seducing her husband to provide arms for her bastard. Venus made no attempt to win the affection of Lavinia for Aeneas; it may be that since Vergil had used her once for such a purpose he did not wish to repeat his effects; it may be that wedlock is Juno's peculiar province; it may also be that in legitimate affections Venus is supremely uninterested. She is quite willing to debauch Dido, but Vergil takes pains to assure us that the action is quite unnecessary, except in order to give pain to both Dido and Aeneas. It is perhaps another aspect of parody that, whereas Odysseus' relations with women are almost uniformly pleasant and prosperous, Aeneas' relations are predominantly hostile or disastrous. So much for the favor and protection of Venus.

The divine machinery of the Aeneid not only seems, but is, imposed on an otherwise already adequate human motivation. The idea that in the physical universe there are somewhere immortally but still physically existing, personal beings of human form, but more than human powers, answering to the concepts, or some of the concepts devised by the poets and called by them gods and goddesses, was quite acceptable to Apuleius, for example; that it was acceptable to Vergil, any more than to Seneca, we cannot imagine. That he believed in a divine governance of the Universe by Universal Mind, we must surely accept; but that this divinity fragmented itself into the conventional forms of Jupiter, Juno, Venus, Mercury, Mars, or that it was consistent with the existence of such creatures in the *intermundia*, the magnificent *credo* of Anchises in *Aen.* 6.724 ff. puts entirely out of the question.

Vergil is closer to Tolstoy than to Homer, to Thackeray than to Ennius. One is tempted to go even further. To call the Aeneid the Epic of the Absurd would be an exaggeration, but it would be an exaggeration in the right direction, certainly less exaggeration than to call it, as at least by implication it is sometimes called, an epic of the conventional.[8] It depicts the triumph of the

[8] When Vergil was choosing names for the contestants in the boat race, and assigning them as progenitors of Roman families, surely he had a free hand. See

depersonalized will, the establishment and maintenance of human values by inhuman means. It enjoins defiance of rational calculation—*contra audentior ito quam tua te fortuna sinet*, and rejection of appeals for supernatural help—*desine fata deum flecti sperare precando*. Aeneas is creating the world by which he is to be judged, in a universe at times favorable, at times unfavorable, at times indifferent, and there is no sure way that he can calculate which response to expect. He belongs to the world of Sartre and Camus, more than to the world of Demodocus and Phemius.

Even more startling is the realization that in several important respects Aeneas reappears with remarkable precision in the Li'l Abner of Al Capp. The same respect and affection for parents and son—even the same maternal dominance—the same unfaltering courage, simple honesty, absolute loyalty; the same lofty immunity at heart to feminine wiles, however he may seem outwardly to have succumbed. Aeneas is certainly more urbane, more dignified, even his severest critics might say, more intelligent; but the resemblance is instructive. Perhaps Vergil as poet at once admired and despised the character he had created.

Aeneas finds out, as Achilles had found, that "the over-faithful sword returns the user / his heart's desire at price of his heart's blood." But Achilles ended with a great gesture of human

whom he chose: Cloanthus, who came in first by successful bribery; he is the ancestor of the Cluentii. What could this name suggest to a Roman reader but the unsavory case immortalized by Cicero's advocacy? The "Roman Cluentii" have no entry in *Magistrates of the Roman Republic*; in *RE* the only name mentioned outside the family of Cicero's *Habitus* is that of an Italian leader defeated by Sulla and killed 89 B.C. Next comes Mnestheus, ancestor of the Memmii, first recorded at Rome in the person of an aedile of the time of the Hannibalic wars. C. Memmius (*RE* 5) was a *tribunus plebis* in 111 B.C.; a *vir acer et infestus potentiae nobilitatis* (Sall. *Iug.* 27.2). C. Memmius (*RE* 8) failed to attain the consulship even by turning his coat and using flagrant bribery. Another C. Memmius, perhaps his son, was one of four *consules suffecti* in 34 B.C. (the latter half); the only Memmius up to that time to attain the consulship at all. Third came Gyas, not assigned to any Roman family; in the light of the other etymologies it is hard to see why Vergil held his hand here. Last was Sergestus, who came to disaster by trying to take a short cut. His gift to Rome was the Sergii, the only patricians in the group; and their most notable member was L. Sergius Catilina. They had provided one of the decemvirs of 450, and a Sergius was consul in 437 and again in 429. Otherwise, their record, though more copious than that of the Cluentii or the Memmii, was undistinguished. These are the contributions of the Trojan stock that Vergil picks out for especial mention. It is irrelevant to his theme; but apparently he cannot resist a sly dig in passing at the pretensions of the old families. Perhaps there is also implied a Sallustian judgment on those engaged in the race for distinction under Aeneas' descendant.

I am indebted here to an as yet unpublished study by P. A. MacKay.

sympathy and reconciliation: Aeneas with the murder of a disarmed suppliant. Vergil has given us no reason to suppose that there is anything insincere in Turnus' submission, and he makes Aeneas perform the deed, characteristically, as in the scene of departure from Dido, with a pathetic and almost ignoble attempt to disclaim responsibility—as Caesar at Pharsalus said "*hoc voluerunt*" (Suet. 30). *Debellare superbos* Aeneas had learned; *parcere subiectis* he had not adequately learned.[9] No wonder that the spirit of Turnus *cum gemitu fugit indignata sub umbras.* Vergil's judgment of the action is indicated by his repetition of the line from the death-scene of Camilla, conscious that she had been unfairly struck down.

Heroism, in the conventional sense, involves loss of humanity. This is a criticism not only of heroic character, but of a world in which such characters are necessary, a world in which the doing of great deeds may demand the sacrifice of the innocent. We are not intended to find excuses for Aeneas' treatment of Dido, or of Turnus; this is part of Vergil's comment on the human condition: that great leaders are necessary, but that they necessarily have a bit of the scoundrel in them; he can appreciate their admirable qualities without shutting his eyes to their unlovable qualities, and he is not sentimental enough to make their failings lovable failings. We are meant to be shocked—shocked into opening our own eyes. Though indeed this sort of double recognition is perhaps commoner in life than in literature; literature has to select, concentrate, omit, emphasize; everyday life must be inclusive of what is offered it, whether it wants to or not.

Vergil himself has told us what the *Aeneid* is intended to be. Half a millennium of Greek philosophy lies between Homer's innocent question, "Which of the gods set off this series of actions?" and Vergil's *Musa mihi causas memora.* The question *Tantaene animis caelestibus irae?* is not a decorative question; it is the heart, the programmatic text of the whole poem, the statement of the problem whose attempted resolution is to occupy the rest of the twelve books. To bring this metaphysical problem on to the stage of human action, Vergil freely reshaped and amplified a dubious legend that presented itself in many conflicting variants. He saw it, inevitably, in the light of the experience of his own

[9] I am indebted here to an as yet unpublished study by W. R. Johnson.

generation. Out of this experience, and conflicting fragments of dubious tradition, and his own powerful fancy, he created an imaginative study of the moral dilemma of men and societies in a universe that often seems indifferent or even hostile to moral action.